

THE LAST LESSON

The story 'The Last Lesson' is set in the days of the Franco-Prussian war. France was defeated by Prussia and districts of Alsace and Lorraine had passed into Prussian hands. The orders came from Berlin to teach only German in the schools of Alsace and Lorraine. The story tells the effect of this transition on the people through the eyes of a young boy, Franz.

The story describes what is just another ordinary day for Franz who started very late for school that morning. In fact, he was reluctant to go to school as he had not prepared his French lesson on participles and his teacher, M. Hamel, was going to conduct an oral test on the topic in the class. Initially, he thought of spending the bright warm day outdoors enjoying the chirping of birds and drilling of Prussian soldiers at the back of the sawmill. But finally, he decided to go to school.

On the way, Franz passed the town hall, where he saw a large crowd reading the bulletin board which had been a source of all bad news. Franz didn't stop there and rushed to the school.

When Franz arrived at the school, he found a strange quietness there. He found that his classmates were already seated in their places and the teacher had already started teaching. The back benches were occupied by the village elders who were grim and solemn. To his surprise, M. Hamel was in the formal dress that he used to wear only on the inspection or prize distribution days. Franz found M. Hamel to be kinder than usual. He didn't scold Franz for being late and allowed him to take his seat. Franz was shocked to get the news that this was the last lesson in French and the new German teacher would take charge on the following day.

He was full of regret for not learning his mother tongue and felt a sudden love for French. He even started liking M. Hamel and forgot all about his ruler and crankiness. When M. Hamel asked Franz to answer a question on participles, he was not able to answer. Even then, M. Hamel didn't scold him and remarked that the only trouble with people of Alsace was of putting off learning till the next day. He blamed parents for sending their children to earn money rather than to school. He also blamed himself for sending students to water his plants or to give them a holiday when he wanted to go fishing.

Hamel then talked of the French language, calling it the most beautiful language in the world. He told the class to keep their language close to their hearts to feel free and happy. As long as an enslaved people held fast to their language, it was as if they had the key to their prison. Their language could liberate them forever. As the church clock struck twelve, M. Hamel with a choked throat wrote on the blackboard *Viva La France!*, ie. Long Live France and dismissed the class.

The story, written in historical background, is a beautiful depiction of the emotional bond of people with their mother tongue. It depicts the pathos of the situation that in order to conquer the minds of the people, it is not enough to win a country physically by force. In order to enslave a people completely, a conqueror needs to enslave their thoughts and make them devoid of their own mother tongue.

Themes

Dominant Theme raised in the text: linguistic chauvinism

"Chauvinism" is a devotion for or against something, just based on what you feel (not necessarily what you may know). So, Linguistic chauvinism is the idea that one's language is superior to that of others. This happens generally when the language is that of the ruling class.

Linguistic chauvinism refers to the imposition of one language on others. Language is considered to be the cultural identity of the people who use it. The language is the pride of the country as it defines the cultural history.

The Last Lesson raises the burning question very innocently through the words of little Franz that “Will they make them sing in German, even the pigeons?” This raises the question of imposing a language on others. The child questions that when even the birds and animals can’t be forced to abandon their language, then what forces a man to enforce a language on others.

Secondary theme: love for one’s own language

‘The Last Lesson’ revolves around the language and its importance to the citizens of a country. It is the duty of every citizen to safeguard the language of the country as it is the identity of that country. The lesson depicts how after defeating France in the war, the Prussians wanted to rule over not only the territory of France but also over the minds and hearts of the people. The story reinforces the fact that we value something more when it is lost. The pain and anguish of the students and the teacher is evident as everyone realizes how things were taken for granted. The lesson emphasizes the importance of the mother tongue for everyone and the need to realize the fact that it is our language which gives us our identity, respect and freedom.

1. The ban on teaching French strengthened the resolve of the French to learn their language. Give evidence from the text to prove/disapprove the above statement.

Ans. The Last Lesson’ clearly brings out the resolve of the French to hold fast to their language. The order from Berlin imposing German language on them made them more determined to respect and learn their language. This was evident in the last lesson of M. Hamel. All the back benches were occupied by villagers that day, including old Hauser, former mayor, former postmaster, etc. Students in the class were quiet and were eager to make the best of the last opportunity to learn their mother tongue.

Hamel taught the last lesson with immense patience and told his students to safeguard their language. He reminded them that they would be able to liberate themselves only if they would keep their language with them. Even the students realised the importance of their language and listened to their teacher very carefully. They could not be distracted by beetles or the cooing of the pigeons that day.

- Q1. Describe the background in which The Last Lesson has been set?**
- Q2. Why was Franz reluctant to go to school? What did he want to do instead?**
- Q3. What did Franz notice that was unusual about the school that day?**
- Q4. Why was there a crowd in front of the bulletin board?**
- Q5. What did Wachter tell Franz? What was the latter’s response?**
- Q6. How had the teacher dressed on the day of the last lesson?**
- Q7. What was Franz’s reaction when he learnt this was the last French lesson for them?**
- Q8. Why were the old men of the village present in the classroom?**
- Q9. Who did Hamel blame for not knowing French?**
- Q10. What did M. Hamel tell the class about French language?**